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House plans SALT quiz of military

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WASHINGTON — Even though the Constitution gives the Senate exclusive jurisdiction over treaties, it has been learned that the House Armed Services Committee has decided to hold its own hearings on the new Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty.

Well-placed congressional sources reveal that the House committee plans to call the Joint Chiefs of Staff to testify in open hearings on the disparities between their recommendations and final treaty provisions.

The sources say committee members believe they have a legitimate role in weighing specific SALT II terms to see how they would affect the many billions of dollars in future weapon choices the House must vote on.

Their hearings, thus, are expected to add an embarrassing backdrop to the Senate debate over ratification of the treaty.

The Senate Foreign Relations Committee begins its formal hearings Monday, to be followed two weeks later by the Senate Armed Services Committee. Meanwhile, the Senate Intelligence Committee will hold closed-door sessions to look at the adequacy of means by which the Administration plans to monitor compliance with the treaty in light of the loss of important intelligence-gathering stations in Iran.

No firm date has been set for the House hearings, but they are expected to take place in September, shortly after the Labor Day recess.

In a letter to the committee chairman calling for the House hearings, Rep. Robin Beard (R-Tenn.) asserted: "The terms of the SALT II agreement do not correspond to the recommendations made by our senior military officials."

Sources say the House plans to review all the ICBM recommendations since the SALT I agreements were negotiated to see how they compare with the final shape of SALT II.

The Joint Chiefs will be asked to assess the military risks entailed by the new accord as compared with its benefits, and to explain why they have withdrawn some of their long-held objections.

In his letter, Beard noted that the Joint Chiefs first urged that all Russian Backfire bombers, which the US intelligence community says have strategic range, be included under SALT's bomber-missile ceiling or, alternatively, permit 100 of the bombers to escape the ceiling but to count all in excess of that number.

Instead, the Administration settled for a pledge from the Russians not to build any more than 30 of the planes a year and not to improve their range and payload.

House sources say that while their hearings could cover some of the same ground as their counterparts in the Senate, they will focus on specific strategic weapon choices the Administration and Congress must address over the next few years. Among them:

—MX missile. The Joint Chiefs urged the White House to deploy 200 large new intercontinental ballistic missiles in a shell game, shunting them among 4000 silo-like holes; the Administration, instead, is leaning toward putting the MX missiles on tracks in long trenches, shunting them among 8800 hardened shelters.

—New bomber. To replace the aging fleet of B52 bombers, the Administration must decide whether to rebuild some of the F111 fighter-bombers to give them more range and low-level penetration, without their counting against the SALT ceiling, or whether to build an entirely new penetrating bomber, or a bigger, slower aircraft that would fire long-range cruise missiles from outside Soviet air defenses, or a combination of these aircrafts.

—Missile submarine. The Administration is said to be having second thoughts whether to continue with a large Trident submarine program or stop that program at about seven subs and supplement it with a larger number of smaller missile submarines that would compound the Russian antisubmarine warfare problems.

Related decisions also have to be made on whether to follow the 4000-mile Trident I missile with the 8000-mile Trident II, and whether to give either or both enough accuracy to be able to destroy Soviet missile silos.

—Theater nuclear weapons. About three Poseidon missile submarines have been diverted from strategic missions to be able to counter Soviet intermediate range SS20 missiles and Backfire bombers threatening Western Europe.

The Administration is discussing with NATO the possibility of developing 1000-mile Pershing II missiles and long-range cruise missiles as a theater force to counter the new Russian weapons and as bargaining leverage in SALT III to negotiate limits on such weapons for both sides.

Some analysts believe the systems would be a more effective deterrent than simply adding more Poseidon missiles for targeting by NATO commanders.

One congressional source said, "We need candid answers from the military not only to intelligently make decisions on some of these costly weapons systems, but also decide what we need and want as a guide to how we should proceed in SALT III."

But the source also conceded that the hearings should give the House some voice in the ratification battle shaping up in the Senate.